

High court enjoys Q&A in rare visit to Valley

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TOPPENISH – Lower Valley residents had a rare opportunity yesterday (Tuesday) to watch the Washington State Supreme Court in action at Toppenish's Heritage University.

Supreme Court hearings like the one held yesterday are typically held in the Temple of Justice in Olympia.

However, the court periodically travels to other locations throughout Washington to hear arguments, which are open to the public.

Several, mostly students, took advantage of the opportunity to not only observe the court but to ask questions of the justices during a Q&A session.

In addition to confirming they are Seahawk fans, justices weighed in on a host of issues posed by the public:

Generally, justices do not factor in economic impacts on who wins and loses a case.

Noting a super-majority of six women to three men on the court, Justice Mary Fairhurst praised mentors – both men and women - who helped advance her career.

She encourages visitors touring the Temple of Justice to imagine themselves sitting on the court or trying a case there.

"The only thing that holds you back is your own mind," Fairhurst told the audience.

There's no easy answer for the court in hearing cases involving personal liberties versus the need for law enforcement to serve and protect.

"That's one of the hardest things we do," said Justice Stephen Gonzalez.

The court's influence extends beyond the Washington state border, Justice Sheryl Gordon McCloud told one audience member.

She quoted a recent publication listing California and Washington's high court opinions as those most frequently cited by other state courts.

The court is cautiously hopeful state lawmakers will provide a remedy to address education funding in keeping with the McCleary decision justices handed down last year.

“We have our fingers crossed,” said Chief Justice Barbara Madsen.